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MUSIC OF THE MONTH

SONGS OF A RUSTIC ANGEL

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

WE shall be celebrating before long the centenary of music's greatest torso—the incomparable “Unfinished” Symphony of Schubert. That of Shelley's death falls in the same year. Schubert, who was almost the age of his poetic contemporary, wrote his B minor Symphony in the year of Shelley's death. Like Shelley, he was too well-beloved of the gods; Shelley died at thirty, Schubert at thirty-one. Like Shelley, he was primarily a lyrist. But he had not Shelley's exigent and challenging mind or his fine-grained spirit. He was four-fifths peasant, and he sang like a rustic angel. When he died, he left behind him personal effects valued at a little over twelve dollars, and some of the loveliest music in existence. Within a year of his death he had been unable to afford a seventeen-cent dinner, and he was selling deathless songs for the present price of four subway tickets.

Almost all of the finer Schubert—his tenderness, his candor, his fragrance, his limpidity, his melancholy, his sense of drama—may be found in the B minor Symphony. It was begun in his twenty-fifth year, and he lived six years longer; yet only the *Allegro*, the *Andante*, and nine measures of the *Scherzo* survive.

The Symphony was composed as a gesture of acknowledgment, in return for the dazzling compliment conferred upon Schubert when he was elected an honorary member of the musical societies of Graz and Linz. A gesture of thanks—yet what a gesture! The music is as intimate and sincere as anything he ever wrote. There is grief in it, and protest. It would be hard to find anything more dolorous in Tchaikovsky's poignant symphonic threnody in the same key than that mournful passage in the first movement of the “Unfinished” where the wailing phase sung by the violins is answered in imitation by the

violas and bassoons. No Slavic brooding was ever more grievous than this. If Sir George Grove chooses to find here "the history of cruel disappointments and broken hopes," who can say that the evidence is against him?

Schubert turned out masterworks as easily and casually as automats turn out griddle-cakes. "When I have done one piece I begin the next," he said to a visitor. In one morning he wrote six of the songs in the *Winterreise*. He composed nearly 1,000 works in thirteen years; and "at an age when Beethoven had produced one symphony," as Sir George observes, "Schubert had written ten." He composed with dangerous ease, and he wrote at times when he had nothing to say, so that not a little of his output seems to-day inexpressive. When he was at his best—and how often he was!—he could write music as fragrant and magical as a June dusk; and he could be thrillingly dramatic. He had, too, the sense of tears, as well as the sense of drama. His art displays almost all the major virtues except ecstasy and incandescence. He was lyrical without the specific gift of ecstasy. If the aim of all enchantment is ecstasy, then Schubert is not one of the great enchanters of music—of whom, indeed, there have been few; perhaps only Wagner, and Chopin, and Debussy. But one need not enchant to be a god of art, or a prophet, or a poet, or a revealer of mysteries. As for incandescence, there has been, probably, only one musical imagination that indisputably commanded it; and that was certainly not Schubert's.

Mr. Edmondstoune Duncan, in his devoted study of Schubert, is reminded by this symphony of "salt-flavored breezes," the "pulsation of waves," and "the freedom and expanse which a wilderness of waters convey to the mind"—though he hastens to say that he does not impute any such pictorial intentions to Schubert. But again, in discussing the free fantasia, he finds in the music such "mystic sounds" as may be heard "in some desolate place where the tide breaks complainingly over the low-lying rocks. It is as a song of forgotten ages; it touches on the mystery of life and death, the yearning of man, the futility of despair." Mr. Duncan finds much else in the music of this symphony: melodies from fairyland, the "blending of peace and passion," an "almost religious atmosphere," reminders of the Merchant

of Venice, "blissful dreams" and "stern realities," and the "trumpet-call of Hope." Only a mail-order catalogue could be more generously varied. Others have found in the famous 'cello theme of the first movement "the most charming melody in all music"; and Philip Hale did not hesitate to say of the first movement of the B minor that "there is nothing of more complete, well-rounded beauty in the literature of music."

Henry James in certain of his later novels, says Rebecca West, fabricated sentences "vast as the Pyramids and a scene that would have made a site for a capital," and with this basic material he "set about constructing a story the size of a hen-house." There are some who would say that Schubert was similarly inclined: that he was wont to evolve a hen-house—or, let us say, a golden cage full of singing birds—after having laid the foundations of a three-acre zoo.

Undoubtedly Schubert's ideas are at times spread pretty thinly over a wide expanse of tonal framework. But Mr. Daniel Gregory Mason, who has written with shrewdness and sensibility about Schubert, is far too stern, we believe, in connecting this weaker aspect of his genius with "a certain flabbiness of moral fibre." We doubt if "moral fibre" has anything to do with the matter at all. Why drag in the Puritan complex? Let us not, in dealing with these problems of artistic behavior, pattern after the hasty and illogical ways of the Bostonians of Professor Agassiz's day, who (it is said) used to suspect him of moral instability because, in his lectures, he was wont to call attention to the fact that in a certain species of the *Radiata* every female marries her grandfather. It seems to us as fantastic to drag Schubert's "moral flabbiness" into an estimate of his artistic characteristics as it was for those Bostonians of an earlier day to feel cool toward the abandoned Agassiz for exhibiting a fact of science—though it should be said that Mr. Mason in his remark about Schubert does not make it quite clear whether he is voicing an original opinion or merely exhibiting the view of an English critic, Mr. H. H. Statham, whom he quotes with approval. In either case, we wish he might have refrained. The habits of Schubert had no more to do with his occasional monotony and diffuseness as a musician than Wagner's liberal attitude toward the marriage

contract had anything to do with his fondness for the chord of the diminished seventh. Schubert's tendency, as a composer, to "run to emptyin's"—the disparity in his writing between dimensions and content—cannot be made to wear any special significance by hitching it to whatever "flabbiness of moral fibre" that divine bourgeois was afflicted with.

"There is," said Mr. Hale years ago, in the most penetrating essay that has been written in English upon Schubert—an essay that is a masterpiece of interpretation—"there is a pot-house Schubert, the composer in the tavern," a figure as absurd as the legendary Schubert who was a "sentimentalist raised to the highest power," but "used for years by the ignorant to point a moral to young men wishing to be musicians, and young women wishing to be musicians' wives." And Mr. Hale asserts his conviction that Schubert's dissipation has been "grossly exaggerated," in view of his vast amount of creative labor. Probably the simple truth is that Schubert was prolix, diffuse, garrulous, because there was more genius in him than artist—because he lacked aesthetic tact, the inspired instinct of omission, the power to concentrate and curtail, the ability to discriminate. Into the capacious bowl of his art—half gold and half pewter—he would (as Miss West says of Mr. James) "toss any sort of object: a jewel, a rose, a bit of string, a visiting-card, confident that the surrounding glow would lend it beauty." Often it did—a thousand times it did. Often he filled it full of a prodigal loveliness, pressed down and overflowing, so that the beauty shines from within, and the bowl becomes translucent alabaster.

There is no denying the prolixity of (for example) the C major Symphony—it is notorious and inescapable. There are more than 200 pages in the miniature full score. Mr. Edmondstone Duncan counted up, in the leisurely days before the War, the number of measures in the Finale alone, and arrived at a total of 1,159. These are indeed, as Mr. Duncan observes, "grand extensions."

Felix Weingartner has said: "Whenever I hear this work well conducted, or conduct it myself [an excessively modest distinction], I become fairly intoxicated with the music. . . . It is quite incomprehensible to me how people can find this symphony

too long and desire to shorten it." That, to our mind, is altogether too lenient an attitude. Schubert—*pace* Mr. Weingartner—was often intolerably garrulous. Of many of his works it may be declared with truth that there is disparity between the worth of the thing said and the time that is taken to say it.

But in the amazing and untarnished score of the "Unfinished" Symphony, the discourse, almost throughout, is like that of a speaker who knows and loves and cunningly employs "the shape and hue and odor and sweet sound of words." It is full of surprising and inexhaustible subtleties of design and procedure, of delicate felicities accomplished with so perfect an art that they wear the innocence and spontaneity of natural processes. When one thinks of the blend of sadness and serenity that is in this music, and in the ampler symphony in C major,—of its beautiful tenderness and freshness and strength, of its wistful charm, its poetry that is often as "a touch from behind a curtain,"—one remembers Francis Thompson's eulogy upon the plenitude of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*: . . . "This amazing lyric world, where the very grass is all a-rustle with lovely spirit things. Poetry is spilt like wine, music runs to drunken waste. The choruses sweep down the wind, tirelessly, flight after flight, till the breathless soul almost cries for respite."

Like all authentic revelation, the music of Schubert at its best has an ever-receding horizon. It gives us the sense of an enchanted familiarity: that sense both of the wonder and the nearness of life—the conviction that just beyond the next hill lies some accessible paradise of the pilgrim mind. To create and maintain that illusion is surely to conquer, by the most daring of flights, a boundless region of spiritual air.

Through the confusion and disarray of contemporary tone-building, which sends up as dense a cloud of controversial dust as the flock of sheep in *Don Quixote*, the tranquil lights of an immortal beauty shine from this music with serene detachment, dropping their loveliness into the upturned gaze of those who still shepherd their flocks of dreams upon untroubled hills.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.